

Some Thoughts on Hope, Cynicism, and the Stories We Tell Ourselves by Maria Popova

To live with sincerity in our culture of cynicism is a difficult dance — one that comes easily only to the very young and the very old. The rest of us are left to tussle with two polarizing forces ripping the psyche asunder by beckoning to it from opposite directions — critical thinking and hope.

Critical thinking without hope is cynicism. Hope without critical thinking is naïveté.

Finding fault and feeling hopeless about improving the situation produces resignation — cynicism is both resignation's symptom and a futile self-protection mechanism against it. Blindly believing that everything will work out just fine also produces resignation, for we have no motive to apply ourselves toward making things better. But in order to survive — both as individuals and as a civilization — and especially in order to thrive, we need the right balance of critical thinking and hope.

A plant needs water in order to survive, and needs the right amount of water in order to thrive. Overwater it and it rots with excess. Underwater it and it dries up inside.

I thought about this recently in observing my unease — my seething cauldron of deep disappointment — with an opinion piece commenting on Arianna Huffington's decision to continue publishing necessary reporting on "what's not working — political dysfunction, corruption, wrongdoing, etc." but to begin giving more light to stories that embody the "perseverance, creativity, and grace" of which we humans are capable. The writer criticizing Huffington's decision asserted, with ample indignation, that "to privilege happy stories over 'unhappy' ones is to present a false view of the world."

Let's consider for a moment the notion of an un-false view of the world — the journalistic ideal of capital-T truth. Let's, too, put aside for now Hunter S. Thompson's rather accurate assertion that the possibility of objectivity is a myth to begin with. Since the golden age of newspapers in the early 1900s, we've endured a century of rampant distortion toward the

other extreme — a consistent and systematic privileging of harrowing and heartbreaking “news” as the raw material of the media establishment. The complaint which a newspaper editor issued in 1923, lamenting the fact that commercial interest rather than journalistic integrity determines what is published as the “news,” could well have been issued today — if anything, the internet has only exacerbated the problem.

The twentieth century was both the golden age of mass media and a century marked by two world wars, the Great Depression, the AIDS crisis, and a litany of genocides. Viewed through that lens, it is the worst century humanity has endured — even worse than the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages, for those deaths were caused by bacteria indifferent to human ideals and immune to human morality. This view of the twentieth century, then, is frightening enough if true, but doubly frightening if untrue — and Steven Pinker has made a convincing case that it is, indeed, untrue. Then, in a grotesque embodiment of Mark Twain’s wry remark that the worst things in his life never happened to him, we have spent a century believing the worst about ourselves as a species and a civilization.

Carl Sagan saw in books “proof that humans are capable of working magic.” The magic of humanity’s most enduring books — the great works of literature and philosophy — lies in the simple fact that they are full of hope for the human spirit. News has become the sorcerous counterpoint to this magic, mongering not proof of our goodness and brilliance but evidence of our basest capabilities.

A related point of cynicism bears consideration: Coupled with the assertion that giving positive stories more voice distorts our worldview was the accusation that Huffington’s motives were purely mercantile — a ploy to prey on Facebook’s algorithms, which incentivize heartening stories over disheartening ones. Could it be, just maybe, not that people are dumb and shallow, and algorithms dumber and shallower, but that we’ve endured a century of fear-mongering from the news industrial complex and we finally have a way of knowing we’re not alone in craving an antidote? That we finally have a cultural commons onto which we can rally for an uprising?

We don’t get to decry the alleged distortion of our worldview until we’ve lived through at least a century of good news to even the playing field so ravaged by the previous century’s extreme negativity bias.

As for Huffington, while we can only ever speculate about another person's motives — for who can peer into the psyche of another and truly see into that person's private truth? — this I continue to believe: The assumptions people make about the motives of others always reveal a great deal more about the assumers than the assumed-about.

This particular brand of cynicism is especially pronounced when the assumed-about have reached a certain level of success or public recognition. Take, for instance, an entity like TED — something that began as a small, semi-secret groundswell that was met with only warmth and love in its first few years of opening up to the larger world. And then, as it reached a tipping point of recognition, TED became the target of rather petty and cynical criticism. Here is an entity that has done nothing more nor less than to insist, over and over, that despite our many imperfections, we are inherently kind and capable and full of goodness — and yet even this isn't safe from cynicism.

Let's return, then, to the question of what is true and what is false, and what bearing this question has — if any — on what we call reality.

The stories that we tell ourselves, whether they be false or true, are always real. We act out of those stories, reacting to their realness. William James knew this when he observed: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind."

What storytellers do — and this includes journalists and TED and everyone in between who has a point of view and an audience, whatever its size — is help shape our stories of how the world works; at their very best, they can empower our moral imagination to envision how the world could work better. In other words, they help us mediate between the ideal and the real by cultivating the right balance of critical thinking and hope. Truth and falsehood belong to this mediation, but it is guided primarily by what we are made to believe is real.

What we need, then, are writers like William Faulkner, who came of age in a brothel, saw humanity at its most depraved, and yet managed to maintain his faith in the human spirit. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he asserted that the writer's duty is "to help man endure by lifting his heart." In contemporary commercial media, driven by private interest, this responsibility to work in the public interest and for the public good recedes

into the background. And yet I continue to stand with E.B. White, who so memorably asserted that “writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life”; that the role of the writer is “to lift people up, not lower them down.”

Yes, people sometimes do horrible things, and we can speculate about why they do them until we run out of words and sanity. But evil only prevails when we mistake it for the norm. There is so much goodness in the world — all we have to do is remind one another of it, show up for it, and refuse to leave.